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ABSTRACT

Recent restrictions in funds made available to higher education, reinforced by declining birth rates and slowing or falling enrollments, are forcing an adjustment of thinking by educators. The growth of the last 20 years was not the normal state of higher education. Educators have come to think that bigger is better as enrollments and faculty have grown and departments have tried to be popular and have seized on fads. One adjustment educators must make is to consider what a particular academic field such as communication can do for its students. If communication departments convey the impression that they think they are experts in everything, they will arouse the suspicion that they know nothing about everything. If communication departments are going to go into an area, it should be because there is a significant reason for being there as part of the central mission. Concentrating on quality instead of size is important if the coming years are to benefit students and faculty. (TJ)

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THE OPPORTUNITIES OF STEADY STATE

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THE OPPORTUNITIES OF STEADY STATE

California's Proposition 13, and its brothers and sisters around the country, has justifiably directed our attention to the current financial threat to higher education. I say directed our attention to the threat because it was there without the Jarvis rhetoric. The evidence was clear early in 1978 that, despite prospects of record state tax revenues, states intended to restrict services by not making, or barely making, inflation levels in their contributions to higher education.[1] The problems of private institutions, at least as serious, have been known for some time.

The money saving psychology is reinforced by declining birth rates. Ten years of "no growth" will be with us even if the "tax revolt" weakens. Only seven states (Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Utah and Vermont) are expected to show enrollment increases. Eleven states are expected to show a loss of enrollment (Arkansas, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Ohio and Pennsylvania).[2] One does not need to be terribly wise to see at once that the states with the largest populations are more likely to lose enrollments than the lower population states, making the national picture discouraging.

There have been many suggestions for meeting these dual problems such as the search for new enrollments among non-traditional students. However, successful such plans might be it would be foolish for us to count on them to return us to the days of growing enrollments. We must adjust to the realities and the realities need not be so bad.

A first reality to be faced is that our experiences of the last

twenty years have led us to believe in growth as the natural condition. We ought to begin our confrontation with reality by realizing that we have just passed through the most amazing period of growth of American higher education. It was not the normal state of higher education. Nothing in our history in any way compares with it. In 1942 there were 1.4 million students enrolled in 1800 colleges. They constituted 15% of all 18 to 21 year olds. In 1972 there were 9.3 million students enrolled in 3,000 colleges. They amounted to 50% of all 18 to 21 year olds. In 1965 the growth rate in American colleges was 12 percent. However, in 1972 the growth rate was 2 percent. Most of that was in the community colleges and even the community college growth was only 5.4 percent.[3] Between 1942 and 1972 we had an incredible growth in numbers of students of almost seven to one. By 1972 the fire had cooled down, however, and the demographic cards were on the table. We didn't really see what was happening until it was forced on us a few years later by the horror stories about thirteen faculty reaching tenure decision and one being retained.

During the post World War II period most of the current communication administrators grew up. We were part of the growth as students, lived with it as faculty and probably came to expect it when we became administrators. Because of our experiences we learned about administration and how to plan for the future with growth as a given. The first thing we should realize is that our experience was unusual in American higher education. What we must adjust to now is the norman condition of equilibrium.[4]

But our problem is not just a matter of adjusting to some general condition, it involves a more serious psychological adjustment. Our

experience has developed in us a psychology of growth. This psychology of growth has come to live with the notion that big is better. It is reflected in a phone conversation I had with a department chairman a few years ago. I asked "how are things going with your department?" He replied, "great, we have 200 majors and seventeen faculty members." Perhaps I am overreacting in this particular case but I think not. Success for my friend is in the size of his program. His first thought is not of the quality of faculty or students or of the kinds of successes his students get but of the numbers. While this is only one example I think you recognize the situation. We have all been guilty of the bigger is better orientation at one time or another. To live with such a view now is potentially disasterous but more than that we were always wrong to accept it. Its negative effects are great in any time.

There are a number of problems with this point of view. First it creates a situation where we put our emphasis on "progress not on wisdom" as one writer has summarized Robert Hutchins' analysis of the confusion in higher education.[5] Since Hutchins' book, The Higher Learning in America, was published in 1936 it seems reasonable to assume that this emphasis on size and growth as a criterion of success is more fundamental than post World War II growth. It is in our genes or, at least, in our value system.

However, if we are to be a "community of scholars" we should be most concerned about what our field can do for students, what contribution we can make to their personal development, their reasoning, their knowledge, their society. Such a concern would generate many opportunities to improve education even in steady state.

One opportunity is to avoid being captured by every temporary fad which attracts students but which draws us away from the central core of our field and makes us claim to be what we are not educated to be. We might disagree about the specifics in that core but we must all be aware that some of our innovations resulted from a desire to capture student popularity. Perhaps the best example nation-wide is the way in which we as a field were willing to play psychiatrist in the 1960's and early 1970's by teaching personality adjustment and calling it interpersonal communication. Forgetting, in our pursuit of student popularity, that our expertise has to do with the relationship of messages to the personal and social environment of our times we, too often, thought we could treat the student's mental health directly. When the turn came a few years ago for the "back to basics" movement some departments discovered they were not so popular any more. "Straight" business and engineering majors were looking for practical skills to improve their interpersonal and public communication. Love beads were out and single breasted three piece suits were in.

Today we are in danger of making a similar mistake. I see people developing programs in hospital communication where the only qualification is that the faculty member once had an operation. Getting a speeding ticket is not grounds for making you an expert in police communication. And when we go into these fields let's be sure that we are talking about communication and not giving thinly disguised courses in psychology or sociology. Marie Hochmuth Nichols was right when she said we had been subject to "the tyranny of relevance." Relevance, which should be a hallmark of our field, how did it come to tyrannize us? In part, at least, I must argue, because we had to see our departments be popular

so we could get more faculty and, therefore we thought, be more important. And imagine our glee (admit it now, we did enjoy it) when our enrollments held up and our old mentor English had to let faculty go because there wasn't as much market for Shakespeare as there was for "developing long term relationships."

Bigger is better, therefore, is an entrepreneurial psychology which causes us to lose track of what we can do well while we seek for what will be popular.

It also gets us into trouble with our colleagues in other departments. I realize that some regard us as academic upstarts with shallow educations and a bag of tricks. I realize that that antagonism has historical roots. But some of our problems are caused by, or at least aggravated by, bigger is better. If we convey to our colleagues the impression that we think we are experts in everything we will arouse the concurrent suspicion that we know nothing about everything. Sooner or later we are going to take the wrong turn in the search for popularity and the academic system will get us.

It is a reality of academic political life that for now and in the foreseeable future universities will always have departments of English, history, mathematics, psychology and physics. There is no guarantee they will have communication, speech pathology or theater departments. Within reason we must engage in the kind of study others do. English departments don't own playwriting and sociology departments don't own small groups research. However, when we do go into an area it should be because we have some significant reason for being there as part of our central mission. If we do that we can avoid needless conflicts with other colleagues.

If there is a new area to be developed, like hospital communication, why don't we develop a really outstanding interdisciplinary program taking advantage of other departments? In short, regardless of the pressure, why not refuse to grow?

There is a really healthy atmosphere in concentrating on quality not size. A good eight person department is better than an average sixteen person department any day. Indeed, I would argue that a good eight person department is frequently better than a good sixteen person department. If you have the faculty you need to cover the essential courses and stimulate each other and the students then smaller is better. The increased opportunities for communication with colleagues, the development of a central focus, the communication of that focus to colleagues and administration will be a benefit to all.

And what if enrollments continue to rise in our media courses or our acting courses or our organizational communication courses? Raise the standards. Take only the best students. Make the products of our program the very best and give ourselves a more worthwhile teaching experience.

There is not an administrator worth paying attention to who does not believe that faculty should be assigned on the basis of program need, not enrollment. Unfortunately, many institutions are saddled with staffing formulas mandated, if not designed, by others which call for FTE measures. We must learn to live with such formulas but not permit them to dominate our lives. Our academic goals not numbers must be our central focus.

The new steady state which we face in the next ten years can be an opportunity for us to focus our attention on our main goals and do them well. We should have done it ten years ago, we must do it now.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jack Magarrell, 'Will the States' New Prosperity Mean More Money for Colleges?" Chronicle of Higher Education, March 6, 1978, p. 3.

2. Jack Magarrell, 'The Enrollment Roller Coaster: Colleges Fear the Big Dip" Chronicle of Higher Education, September 5, 1978, p. 12.

3. Larry J. Leslie and Howard F. Miller, Higher Education and the Steady State" (ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education: Washington DC, 1974), p. 5.

4. Leslie and Miller, p. 14-15. Although there are ups and downs the general trend of enrollments in higher education has been up since 1890. We may be at a low point at the moment and be able to look for some increases in ten years. But, even a steady growth trend will give us nothing like the wild increases through which we have passed. Even traditional growth trends come under the designation "steady state."

5. Leon Botstein, "The Higher Learning" The Center Magazine, March/April, 1978, p. 37.